

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 8, 2004

The Honorable Ann M. Veneman
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Veneman:

We were glad that at our behest last May you agreed to waive the local match requirement for the \$150 million that was appropriated to Southern California in the fiscal year 2004 Omnibus Appropriations bill to remove dead and dying trees under the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program. However, we are concerned to hear that the local match requirement may be reinstated at the end of the summer fire season.

As you know, earlier this year, the local cost share requirements under the EWP program were preventing critical fire prevention activities from moving forward, causing further delay in addressing the tremendous fire threat that exists in Southern California. It is our understanding that since the local match requirement was waived, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been working with the local communities to accelerate the removal of dead trees that pose a significant wildfire threat to life and property. According to NRCS, without the local cost share waiver, the current rate of progress on wildfire prevention will not continue and there will be delays in completing these important projects.

Reinstating the local match requirement makes no sense. First, despite cooler temperatures and likely precipitation beginning in late fall, the threat of a serious wildfire in Southern California's forests persists throughout the year. For example, last year's devastating fires occurred over a 15-day period between October 21 and November 4, while in previous years, other serious fires have occurred during winter months. Second, because of the continuing drought and bark beetle infestation, the number of acres of dead and dying trees has actually grown since last year's fires were extinguished. Finally, reinstating the local cost share, even temporarily, will inevitably cause delays and the loss of valuable time needed to remove dead trees before the return of high fire danger weather.


It is imperative that we do all that is possible to address the threat of fire in Southern California. We urge you to maintain the local match waiver for the \$150 million of EWP funds provided to Southern California. This will allow the NRCS and local communities in Southern California to address the continued threat of wildfire as expeditiously as possible.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Barbara Boxer
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

cc: The Honorable Mark Rey, Under Secretary, Natural Resources and
Environment, USDA